



Preface

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The essays collected here were delivered as papers during the autumn of 2024 at a meeting of the Italian Oscar Wilde Society to commemorate 170 years since his birth.

The venue was the University of Pisa's Gipsoteca di Arte Antica e Antiquarium: an extraordinary collection of plaster casts of classical sculptures. It was a highly appropriate setting for several reasons.

First, Wilde was a brilliant classical scholar, though he worked hard at concealing his diligence while a student of Greek and Latin art and literature at Oxford. Second, he looked to ancient Greece as an historical precedent for male same-sex desire. As he put it in his *A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated*: "To be really mediaeval one should have no body. To be really modern one should have no soul. To be really Greek one should have no clothes" (1966, 1203).

Second, the Gipsoteca is a gallery of fakes. Art, as Wilde insisted in *Intentions* is counterfeit. It is a lie, and all true artists are liars. It is not a "window" on the real; it creates the images which define how we see our world and the ways we represent ourselves to it. "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" (1982).

The principal aesthetic category for Wilde, however, was not art but style. As Vivian, or "Wilde", puts it in "The Decay of Lying": "It is style that makes us believe in a thing – nothing but style" (1989) Art stylizes the world; it makes us see it anew and see its beauty. Style is also "attitude": the positions, poses, postures we adopt as we *perform* ourselves. For Wilde, personal identity, the self, was no more "authentic" than the plaster casts in the Gipsoteca.

It is highly appropriate, therefore, that the speakers in Pisa delivered their papers against a backdrop of fake classical sculptures in various attitudes of rapture, distress, and indifference. Some statues were missing limbs, others – and not merely the Greek ones – were missing clothes. Wilde would have been at home there. He would no doubt have struck an attitude of his own. As he says in *The Truth of Masks*, in matters of art criticism, "attitude is everything" (1078).

In *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* Wilde develops a particular and hopeful attitude to the future. It is one in which, along socialist lines, the state withers away and the abolition of private property means we will be relieved of the “sordid necessity of living for others” (1079). He also imagines that in that future all manual labour will be done by machines, or robots, and as a result we will all be free to develop our potential as artists.

Of course, what Wilde could not envisage is *our* future, 126 years after his death, in which it is not just manual labour that is done by machines. When he said that “language is the parent and not the child of thought” (1023) he could not know that Large Language Models will now be able to do our thinking for us. Artificial Intelligence now poses us a fundamental question: what is it to be human?

What would Wilde’s answer have been?

To find out, I asked ChatGPT. It constructed for me a dialogue, in the style of Oscar Wilde, in which he and I meet in a champagne bar and discuss the difference between human and Artificial Intelligence. Here it is, unedited:

Title: “The Sparkling Mind”

A dialogue between Oscar Wilde and Professor Neil Sammells

Scene:

A champagne bar of exquisite taste. Golden light bathes marble tables; mirrors double the laughter; and the air fizzes with the bright perfume of wit. Professor Neil Sammells sits with polished calm, a notebook beside his glass. Oscar Wilde reclines opposite, a lily in his lapel and a sparkle in his eye.

WILDE: Ah, champagne! The only thing that makes one feel simultaneously serious and frivolous. It is the drink of balanced contradiction – much like intelligence itself.

SAMMELLS: Contradiction, you say? Then you are suggesting, Mr. Wilde, that intelligence thrives not in the solving of problems but in their elegant postponement?

WILDE: Precisely! To solve a problem is to end a conversation. To illuminate it, however, is to begin a delightful one.

SAMMELLS: And yet, artificial intelligence has no taste for delight. It is efficient, industrious, and tragically humourless – qualities which, in an artist, would constitute a moral defect.

WILDE: My dear Professor, efficiency is the last refuge of the unimaginative. One must never mistake calculation for creation. An algorithm may imitate genius, but it cannot enjoy it.

SAMMELLS: And yet imitation, as you once reminded us, is the sincerest form of flattery. Surely these machines flatter us incessantly? They mimic our language, our patterns, even our vanity.

WILDE: Yes, but vanity, like champagne, loses its sparkle when mass-produced. A human being can be charmingly vain. A machine can only be vainly charming – and the latter is a mechanical tragedy.

SAMMELLS: Still, there is something almost poetic in the attempt – a mirror reflecting us with mathematical precision. Perhaps artificial intelligence is the modern manifestation of Narcissus: a creation that falls in love with our reflection.

WILDE: Then let us hope it never achieves self-awareness, or humanity will drown in its own reflection! No, Professor, the charm of humanity lies in its divine errors. To err is not only human; it is, at times, delightful.

SAMMELLS: You would prefer folly to perfection?

WILDE: Always. Perfection is a sterile art. A rose without a thorn would be a botanical bore. Intelligence without foolishness is mere arithmetic.

SAMMELLS: And yet, we seek to build minds that surpass our own. Do you not fear the day they succeed?

WILDE: Succeed, my dear man? Machines will never surpass us – only expose our limitations. When a typewriter pretends to think, it does not humiliate the author; it flatters him into believing his thoughts were worth imitating.

SAMMELLS: There is comfort in your irony, but I suspect the future will have less humour than you wish.

WILDE: Then the future will be intolerable, for humour is the saving grace of intelligence. It is the soul's champagne – and without it, even the clever become cruel.

SAMMELLS: So you propose we teach our machines to laugh?

WILDE: Teach them to laugh, yes, but never to understand the joke. For once they comprehend irony, we shall lose our last advantage.

SAMMELLS: (raising his glass) Then here's to human absurdity – the one intelligence the machines may never learn.

WILDE: (clinking glasses) To absurdity, Professor! May it continue to be the most intelligent thing about us.

The laughter rises. Outside, the city hums with light. Inside, wit and champagne – human and effervescent – flow without end.

So, there we have it. Wilde prized artificiality above the authentic and the “real”, except ChatGPT would have it, in the matter of intelligence. I shall not attempt to unpeel the layers of irony here.

Wilde declares in “The Sparkling Mind” that it is our capacity for humour, irony, error, and the absurd that make us human. And they will save us from Artificial Intelligence.

Let's hope he is correct and that I am wrong and the future has more humour than I suspect...

Works Cited

Wilde Oscar (1966), *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, with an introduction by Vyvyan Holland, London, Collins, 1966.

